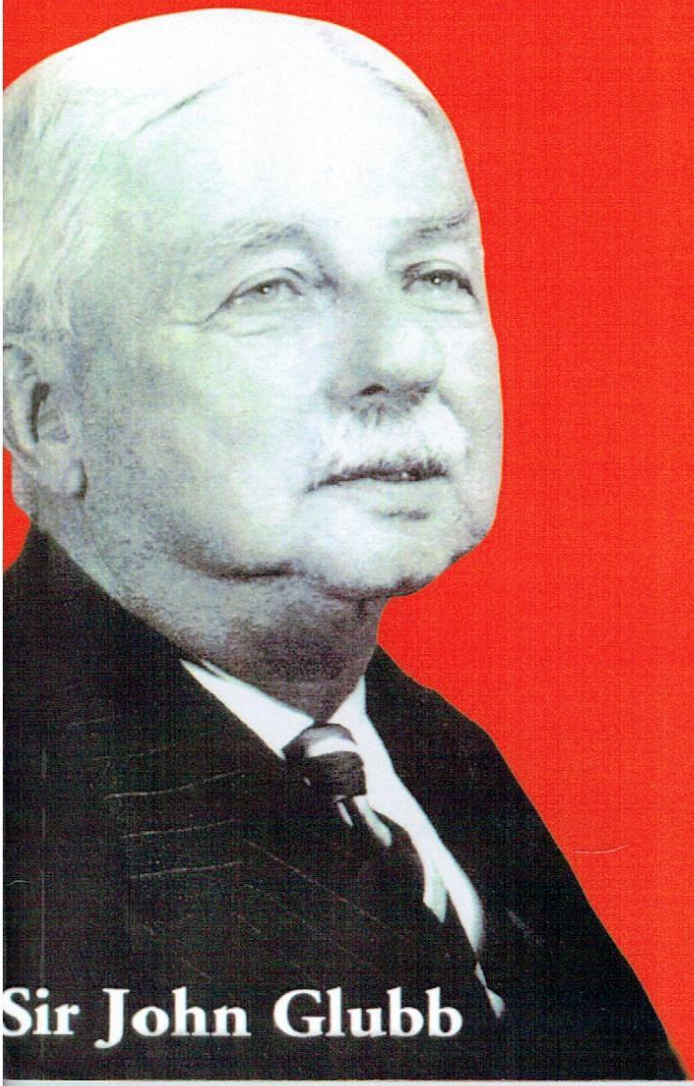
THE FATE OF EMPIRES

and

Search for Survival



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The Fate of Empires and Search for Survival

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About the Author

Also by Estate of Sir John Bagot Glubb

Foreword

William Blackwood & Sons Ltd, Edinburgh, 1976, 1977.

John Bagot Glubb was born in 1897, his father being a regular officer in the Royal Engineers. At the age of four he left England for Mauritius, where his father was posted for a three-year tour of duty. At the age of ten he was sent to school for a year in Switzerland. These youthful travels may have opened his mind to the outside world at an early age.

He entered the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich in September 1914, and was commissioned in the Royal Engineers in April 1915. He served throughout the first World War in France and Belgium, being wounded three times and awarded the Military Cross.

In 1920 he volunteered for service in Iraq, as a regular officer, but in 1926 resigned his commission and accepted an administrative post under the Iraq Government. In 1930, however, he signed a contract to serve the Transjordan Government (now Jordan). From 1939 to 1956 he commanded the famous Jordan Arab Legion, which was in reality the Jordan Army.

Since his retirement he has published seventeen books, chiefly on the Middle East, and has lectured widely in Britain, the United States and Europe.

Preface

As we pass through life, we learn by experience. We look back on our behavior when we were young and think how foolish we were. In the same way our family, our community and our town endeavor to avoid the mistakes made by our predecessors.

The experiences of the human race have been recorded, in more or less detail, for some four thousand years. If we attempt to study such a period of time in as many countries as possible, we seem to discover the same patterns constantly repeated under widely differing conditions of climate, culture and religion. Surely, we ask ourselves, if we studied calmly and impartially the history of human institutions and development over these four thousand years, should we not reach conclusions which would assist to solve our problems today? For everything that is occurring around us has happened again and again before.

No such conception ever appears to have entered into the minds of our historians. In general, historical teaching in schools is limited to this small island. We endlessly mull over the Tudors and the Stewarts, the Battle of Crecy, and Guy Fawkes. Perhaps this narrowness is due to our examination system, which necessitates the careful definition of a syllabus which all children must observe.

I remember once visiting a school for mentally handicapped children. “Our children do not have to take examinations,” the headmaster told me,” and so we are able to teach them things which will be really useful to them in life.”

However this may be, the thesis which I wish to propound is that priceless lessons could be learned if the history of the past four thousand years could be thoroughly and impartially studied. In these two articles, which first appeared in Blackwood’s Magazine, I have attempted briefly to sketch some of the kinds of lessons which I believe we could learn. My plea is that history should be the history of the human race, not of one small country or

period.

Acknowledgments

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1

I - Learning from history

'The only thing we learn from history,' it has been said, 'is that men never learn from history', a sweeping generalization perhaps, but one which the chaos in the world today goes far to confirm. What then can be the reason why, in a society which claims to probe every problem, the bases of history are still so completely unknown?

Several reasons for the futility of our historical studies may be suggested.

First, our historical work is limited to short periods—the history of our own country, or that of some past age which, for some reason, we hold in respect.

Second, even within these short periods, the slant we give to our narrative is governed by our own vanity rather than by objectivity. If we are considering the history of our own country, we write at length of the periods when our ancestors were prosperous and victorious, but we pass quickly over their shortcomings or their defeats. Our people are represented as patriotic heroes, their enemies as grasping imperialists, or subversive rebels. In other words, our national histories are propaganda, not well balanced investigations.

Third, in the sphere of world history, we study certain short, usually unconnected, periods, which fashion at certain epochs has made popular. Greece 500 years before Christ, and the Roman Republic and early Roman Empire are cases in point. The intervals between the 'great periods' are neglected. Recently Greece and Rome have become largely discredited, and history tends to become increasingly the parochial history of our own countries.

To derive any useful instruction from history, it seems to me essential first of all to grasp the principle that history, to be meaningful, must be the history of the human race. For history is a continuous process, gradually developing, changing and turning back, but in general moving forward in a single mighty stream. Any useful lessons to be derived must be learned by the study of the whole flow of human development, not by the selection of short periods here and there in one country or another.

Every age and culture is derived from its predecessors, adds some contribution of its own, and passes it on to its successors. If we boycott various periods of history, the origins of the new cultures which succeeded them cannot be explained.

Physical science has expanded its knowledge by building on the work of its predecessors, and by making millions of careful experiments, the results of which are meticulously recorded. Such methods have not yet been employed in the study of world history. Our piecemeal historical work is still mainly dominated by emotion and prejudice.

2

II - The lives of empires

If we desire to ascertain the laws which govern the rise and fall of empires, the obvious course is to investigate the imperial experiments recorded in history, and to endeavor to deduce from them any lessons which seem to be applicable to them all.

The word 'empire', by association with the British Empire, is visualized by some people as an organization consisting of a home-country in Europe and 'colonies' in other continents. In this essay, the term 'empire' is used to signify a great power, often called today a superpower. Most of the empires in history have been large land blocks, almost without overseas possessions.

We possess a considerable amount of information on many empires recorded in history, and of their vicissitudes and the lengths of their lives, for example:

The nation Dates of rise and fall Duration in years

Assyria 859-612 B.C. 247
Persia 538-330 B.C. 208
(Cyrus and his descendants)
Greece 331-100 B.C. 231
(Alexander and his successors)
Roman Republic 260-27 B.C. 233
Roman Empire 27 B.C.-A.D. 180 207
Arab Empire A.D. 634-880 246
Mameluke Empire 1250-1517 267

Ottoman Empire 1320-1570 250
Spain 1500-1750 250
Romanov Russia 1682-1916 234
Britain 1700-1950 250
Roman Empire 27 B
Arab Empire A.

This list calls for certain comments. (1) The present writer is exploring the facts, not trying to prove anything. The dates given are largely arbitrary. Empires do not usually begin or end on a certain date. There is endeavor to deduce from them any lessons which seem to be applicable to them all. There is normally a gradual period of expansion and then a period of decline. The resemblance in the duration of these great powers may be queried. Human affairs are subject to many chances, and it is not to be expected that they could be calculated with mathematical accuracy.

The word 'empire', by association with the British Empire, is visualized by some people as an organization consisting of a home country in Europe and 'colonies' in other continents. In this essay, the term 'empire' is used to signify a great power, often called today a superpower. Most of the empires in history have been large land blocks, almost without overseas possessions.

We possess a considerable amount of information on many empires recorded in history, and of their vicissitudes and the lengths of their lives, for example: of rise and fall Duration in years 859-612 B.C. 247 538-330 B.C. 208

(2) Nevertheless, it is suggested that there is sufficient resemblance between the life periods of these different empires to justify further study. (3) The division of Rome into two periods may be thought unwarranted. The first, or republican, period dates from the time when Rome became the mistress of Italy, and ends with the accession of Augustus. The imperial period extends from the accession of Augustus to the death of Marcus Aurelius. It is true that the empire survived nominally for more than a century after this date, but it did so in constant confusion, rebellions, civil wars and barbarian invasions. (4) Not all empires endured for their full lifespan. The Babylonian Empire of Nebuchadnezzar, for example, was

overthrown by Cyrus, after a life duration of only some seventy-four years. (5) An interesting deduction from the figures seems to be that the duration of empires does not depend on the speed of travel or the nature of weapons. The Assyrians marched on foot and fought with spears and bow and arrows. The British used artillery, railways and ocean-going ships. Yet the two empires lasted for approximately the same periods.

There is a tendency nowadays to say that this is the jet-age, and consequently there is nothing for us to learn from past empires. Such an attitude seems to be erroneous. (6) It is tempting to compare the lives of empires with those of human beings. We may choose a figure and say that the average life of a human being is seventy years. Not all human beings live exactly seventy years. Some die in infancy, others are killed in accidents in middle life, some survive to the age of eighty or ninety. Nevertheless, in spite of such exceptions, we are justified in saying that seventy years is a fair estimate of the average person's expectation of life.

(7) We may perhaps at this stage be allowed to draw certain conclusions:

(a) In spite of the accidents of fortune, and the apparent circumstances of the human race at different epochs, the periods of duration of different empires at varied epochs show a remarkable similarity.

(b) Immense changes in the technology of transport or in methods of warfare do not seem to affect the life-expectation of an empire.

(c) The changes in the technology of transport and of war have, however, affected the shape of empires. The Assyrians, marching on foot, could only conquer their neighbors, who were accessible by land—the Medes, the Babylonians, the Persians and the Egyptians.

The British, making use of ocean-going ships, conquered many countries and subcontinents, which were accessible to them by water—North America, India, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand—but they never succeeded in conquering their neighbors, France, Germany and Spain.

But, although the shapes of the Assyrian and the British Empires were entirely different, both lasted about the same length of time.

3

III - The human yardstick

What then, we may ask, can have been the factor which caused such an extraordinary similarity in the duration of empires, under such diverse conditions, and such utterly different technological achievements?

One of the very few units of measurement which have not seriously changed since the Assyrians is the human 'generation', a period of about twenty-five years. Thus a period of 250 years would represent about ten generations of people. A closer examination of the characteristics of the rise and fall of great nations may emphasis the possible significance of the sequence of generations.

Let us then attempt to examine the stages in the lives of such powerful nations.

4

IV - Stage one. The outburst

Again and again in history we find a small nation, treated as insignificant by its contemporaries, suddenly emerging from its homeland and overrunning large areas of the world. Prior to Philip (359-336 B.C.), Macedon had been an insignificant state to the north of Greece. Persia was the great power of the time, completely dominating the area from Eastern Europe to India. Yet by 323 B.C., thirty-six years after the accession of Philip, the Persian Empire had ceased to exist, and the Macedonian Empire extended from the Danube to India, including Egypt.

This amazing expansion may perhaps he attributed to the genius of Alexander the Great, but this cannot have been the sole reason; for although after his death everything went wrong—the Macedonian generals fought one another and established rival empires—Macedonian preeminence survived for 231 years.

In the year A.D. 600, the world was divided between two superpower groups as it has been for the past fifty years between Soviet Russia and the West. The two powers were the eastern Roman Empire and the Persian Empire. The Arabs were then the despised and backward inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula. They consisted chiefly of wandering tribes, and had no government, no constitution and no army. Syria, Palestine, Egypt and North Africa were Roman provinces, Iraq was part of Persia.

The Prophet Mohamed preached in Arabia from A.D. 613 to 632, when he died.

In 633, the Arabs burst out of their desert peninsula, and simultaneously attacked the two

super-powers. Within twenty years, the Persian Empire had ceased to exist. Seventy years after the death of the Prophet, the Arabs had established an empire extending from the Atlantic to the plains of Northern India and the frontiers of China.

At the beginning of the thirteenth century, the Mongols were a group of savage tribes in the steppes of Mongolia. In 1211, Genghis Khan invaded China. By 1253, the Mongols had established an empire extending from Asia Minor to the China Sea, one of the largest empires the world has ever known.

The Arabs ruled the greater part of Spain for 780 years, from 712 A.D. to 1492. (780 years back in British history would take us to 1196 and King Richard Cœur de Lion.)

During these eight centuries, there had been no Spanish nation, the petty kings of Aragon and Castile alone holding on in the mountains. The agreement between Ferdinand and Isabella and Christopher Columbus was signed immediately after the fall of Granada, the last Arab kingdom in Spain, in 1492.

Within fifty years, Cortez had conquered Mexico, and Spain was the world's greatest empire. Examples of the sudden outbursts by which empires are born could be multiplied indefinitely. These random illustrations must suffice.

5

V. Characteristics of the outburst

These sudden outbursts are usually characterized by an extraordinary display of energy and courage. The new conquerors are normally poor, hardy and enterprising and above all aggressive. The decaying empires which they overthrow are wealthy but defensive-minded. In the time of Roman greatness, the legions used to dig a ditch round their camps at night to avoid surprise. But the ditches were mere earthworks, and between them wide spaces were left through which the Romans could counter-attack. But as Rome grew older, the earthworks became high walls, through which access was given only by narrow gates. Counterattacks were no longer possible. The legions were now passive defenders.

But the new nation is not only distinguished by victory in battle, but by unresting enterprise in every field. Men hack their way through jungles, climb mountains, or brave the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans in tiny cockle-shells. The Arabs crossed the Straits of Gibraltar in A.D. 711 with 12,000 men, defeated a Gothic army of more than twice their strength, marched straight over 250 miles of unknown enemy territory and seized the Gothic capital of Toledo. At the same stage in British history, Captain Cook discovered Australia. Fearless initiative characterizes such periods.

Other peculiarities of the period of the conquering pioneers are their readiness to improvise and experiment. Untrammeled by traditions, they will turn anything available to their purpose. If one method fails, they try something else. Uninhibited by textbooks or book learning, action is their solution to every problem.

Poor, hardy, often half-starved and ill-clad, they abound in courage, energy and initiative,

overcome every obstacle and always seem to be in control of the situation.

6

VI. The causes of race outbursts

The modern instinct is to seek a reason for everything, and to doubt the veracity of a statement for which a reason cannot be found. So many examples can be given of the sudden eruption of an obscure race into a nation of conquerors that the truth of the phenomenon cannot be held to be doubtful.

To assign a cause is more difficult. Perhaps the easiest explanation is to assume that the poor and obscure race is tempted by the wealth of the ancient civilization, and there would undoubtedly appear to be an element of greed for loot in barbarian invasions.

Such a motivation may be divided into two classes. The first is mere loot, plunder and rape, as, for example, in the case of Attila and the Huns, who ravaged a great part of Europe from A.D. 450 to 453. However, when Attila died in the latter year, his empire fell apart and his tribes returned to Eastern Europe.

Many of the barbarians who founded dynasties in Western Europe on the ruins of the Roman Empire, however, did so out of admiration for Roman civilization, and themselves aspired to become Romans.

7

VII. A providential turnover?

Whatever causes may be given for the overthrow of great civilizations by barbarians, we can sense certain resulting benefits. Every race on earth has distinctive characteristics. Some have been distinguished in philosophy, some in administration, some in romance, poetry or religion, some in

If the same nation were to retain its domination indefinitely, its peculiar qualities would permanently characterize the whole human race. Under the system of empires each lasting for 250 years, the sovereign race has time to spread its particular virtues far and wide. Then, however, another people, with entirely different peculiarities, takes its place, and its virtues and accomplishments are likewise disseminated. By this system, each of the innumerable races of the world enjoys a period of greatness, during which its peculiar qualities are placed at the service of mankind.

To those who believe in the existence of God, as the Ruler and Director of human affairs, such a system may appear as a manifestation of divine wisdom, tending towards the slow and ultimate perfection of humanity.

8

VIII. The course of empire

The first stage of the life of a great nation, therefore, after its outburst, is a period of amazing initiative, and almost incredible enterprise, courage and hardihood. These qualities, often in a very short time, produce a new and formidable nation. These early victories, however, are won chiefly by reckless bravery and daring initiative.

The ancient civilization thus attacked will have defended itself by its sophisticated weapons, and by its military organization and discipline. The barbarians quickly appreciate the advantages of these military methods and adopt them. As a result, the second stage of expansion of the new empire consists of more organized, disciplined and professional campaigns.

In other fields, the daring initiative of the original conquerors is maintained—in geographical exploration, for example: pioneering new countries, penetrating new forests, climbing unexplored mountains, and sailing uncharted seas. The new nation is confident, optimistic and perhaps contemptuous of the 'decadent' races which it has subjugated.

The methods employed tend to be practical and experimental, both in government and in warfare, for they are not tied by centuries of tradition, as happens in ancient empires.

Moreover, the leaders are free to use their own improvisations, not having studied politics or tactics in schools or in textbooks.

9

IX. U.S.A. in the stage of the pioneers

In the case of the United States of America, the pioneering period did not consist of a barbarian conquest of an effete civilization, but of the conquest of barbarian peoples.

Thus, viewed from the outside, every example seems to be different. But viewed from the standpoint of the great nation, every example seems to be similar.

The United States arose suddenly as a new nation, and its period of pioneering was spent in the conquest of a vast continent, not an ancient empire. Yet the subsequent life history of the United States has followed the standard pattern which we shall attempt to trace—the periods of the pioneers, of commerce, of affluence, of intellectualism and of decadence.

10

X. Commercial expansion

The conquest of vast areas of land and their subjection to one government automatically acts as a stimulant to commerce. Both merchants and goods can be exchanged over considerable distances. Moreover, if the empire be an extensive one, it will include a great variety of climates, producing extremely varied products, which the different areas will wish to exchange with one another.

The speed of modern methods of transportation tends to create in us the impression that far-flung commerce is a modern development, but this is not the case. Objects made in Ireland, Scandinavia and China have been found in the graves or the ruins of the Middle East, dating from 1,000 years before Christ. The means of transport were slower, but, when a great empire was in control, commerce was freed from the innumerable shackles imposed upon it today by passports, import permits, customs, boycotts and political interference.

The Roman Empire extended from Britain to Syria and Egypt, a distance, in a direct line, of perhaps 2,700 miles. A Roman official, transferred from Britain to Syria, might spend six months on the journey. Yet, throughout the whole distance, he would be traveling in the same country, with the same official language, the same laws, the same currency and the same administrative system. Today, some twenty independent countries separate Britain from Syria, each with its own government, its own laws, politics, customs fees, passports and currencies, making commercial co-operation almost impossible. And this process of disintegration is still continuing. Even within the small areas of the modern European nations, provincial movements demanding secession or devolution tend further to splinter the continent.

The present fashion for ‘independence’ has produced great numbers of tiny states in the world, some of them consisting of only one city or of a small island. This system is an insuperable obstacle to trade and cooperation. The present European Economic

Community is an attempt to secure commercial cooperation among small independent states over a large area, but the plan meets with many difficulties, due to the mutual jealousies of so many nations.

Even savage and militaristic empires promoted commerce, whether or not they intended to do so. The Mongols were some of the most brutal military conquerors in history, massacring the entire populations of cities. Yet, in the thirteenth century, when their empire extended from Peking to

Hungary, the caravan trade between China and Europe achieved a remarkable degree of prosperity—the whole journey was in the territory of one government.

In the eighth and ninth centuries, the caliphs of Baghdad achieved fabulous wealth owing to the immense extent of their territories, which constituted a single trade bloc. The empire of the caliphs is now divided into some twenty-five separate ‘nations’.

11

XI. The pros and cons of empires

In discussing the life-story of the typical empire, we have digressed into a discussion of whether empires are useful or injurious to mankind. We seem to have discovered that empires have certain advantages, particularly in the field of commerce, and in the establishment of peace and security in vast areas of the globe. Perhaps we should also include the spread of varied cultures to many races. The present infatuation for independence-

The present attempts to create a European community may be regarded as a practical endeavor to constitute a new super-power, in spite of the fragmentation resulting from the craze for independence. If it succeeds, some of the local independencies will have to be sacrificed. If it fails, the same result may be attained by military conquest, or by the partition of Europe between rival superpowers. The inescapable conclusion seems, however, to be that larger territorial units are a benefit to commerce and to public stability, whether the broader territory be achieved by voluntary association or by military action.

12

XII. Sea power

One of the more benevolent ways in which a super-power can promote both peace and commerce is by its command of the sea.

From Waterloo to 1914, the British Navy commanded the seas of the world. Britain grew rich, but she also made the Seas safe for the commerce of all nations, and prevented major wars for 100 years.

Curiously enough, the question of sea power was never clearly distinguished, in British politics during the last fifty years, from the question of imperial rule over other countries. In fact, the two subjects are entirely distinct. Sea power does not offend small countries, as does military occupation. If Britain had maintained her navy, with a few naval bases overseas in isolated islands, and had given independence to colonies which asked for it, the world might well be a more stable place today. In fact, however, the navy was swept away in the popular outcry against imperialism.

13

XIII. The Age of Commerce

Let us now, however, return to the life-story of our typical empire. We have already considered the age of outburst, when a little regarded people suddenly bursts on to the world stage with a wild courage and energy.

Let us call it the Age of the Pioneers.

Then we saw that these new conquerors acquired the sophisticated weapons of the old empires, and adopted their regular systems of military organization and training. A great period of military expansion ensued, which we may call the Age of

Conquests. The conquests resulted in the acquisition of vast territories under one government, thereby automatically giving rise to commercial prosperity. We may call this the Age of Commerce.

The Age of Conquests, of course, overlaps the Age of Commerce. The proud military traditions still hold sway and the great armies guard the frontiers, but gradually the desire to make money seems to gain hold of the public. During the military period, glory and honor were the principal objects of ambition. To the merchant, such ideas are but empty words, which add nothing to the bank balance.

14

XIV. Art and luxury

The wealth which seems, almost without effort, to pour into the country enables the commercial classes to grow immensely rich.

How to spend all this money becomes a problem to the wealthy business community.

Art, architecture and luxury find rich patrons. Splendid municipal buildings and wide streets lend dignity and beauty to the wealthy areas of great cities. The rich merchants build themselves palaces, and money is invested in communications, highways, bridges, railways or hotels, according to the varied patterns of the ages.

The first half of the Age of Commerce appears to be peculiarly splendid. The ancient virtues of courage, patriotism and devotion to duty are still in evidence. The nation is proud, united and full of self confidence. Boys are still required, first of al to be manly—to ride, to shoot straight and to tell the truth. (It is remarkable what emphasis is placed, at this stage, on the manly virtue of truthfulness, for lying is cowardice—the fear of facing up to the situation.)

Boys' schools are intentionally rough. Frugal eating, hard living, breaking the ice to have a bath and similar customs are aimed at producing a strong, hardy and fearless breed of men. Duty is the word constantly drummed into the heads of young people.

The Age of Commerce is also marked by great enterprise in the exploration for new forms of wealth. Daring initiative is shown in the search for profitable enterprises in far corners of the earth, perpetuating to some degree the adventurous courage of the Age of Conquests.

15

XV. The Age of Affluence

There does not appear to be any doubt that money is the agent which causes the decline of this strong, brave and self-confident people. The decline in courage, enterprise and a sense of duty is, however, gradual.

The first direction in which wealth injures the nation is a moral one. Money replaces honor and adventure as the objective of the best young men. Moreover, men do not normally seek to make money for their country or their community, but for themselves. Gradually, and almost imperceptibly, the Age of Affluence silences the voice of duty. The object of the young and the ambitious is no longer fame, honor or service, but cash.

Education undergoes the same gradual transformation. No longer do schools aim at producing brave patriots ready to serve their country. Parents and students alike seek the educational qualifications which will command the highest salaries. The Arab moralist, Ghazali (1058-1111), complains in these very same words of the lowering of objectives in the declining Arab world of his time. Students, he says, no longer attend college to acquire learning and virtue, but to obtain those qualifications which will enable them to grow rich. The same situation is everywhere evident among us in the West today.

16

XVI. High Noon

That which we may call the High Noon of the nation covers the period of transition from the Age of Conquests to the Age of

Affluence: the age of Augustus in Rome, that of Harun al-Rashid in Baghdad, of Sulaiman the Magnificent in the Ottoman Empire, or of Queen Victoria in Britain. Perhaps we might add the age of Woodrow Wilson in the United States.

All these periods reveal the same characteristics. The immense wealth accumulated in the nation dazzles the onlookers.

Enough of the ancient virtues of courage, energy and patriotism survive to enable the state successfully to defend its frontiers. But, beneath the surface, greed for money is gradually replacing duty and public service.

Indeed the change might be summarized as being from service to selfishness.

17

XVII. Defensiveness

Another outward change which invariably marks the transition from the Age of Conquests to the Age of Affluence is the spread of defensiveness. The nation, immensely rich, is no longer interested in glory or duty, but is only anxious to retain its wealth and its luxury. It is a period of defensiveness, from the Great Wall of China, to Hadrian's Wall on the Scottish Border, to the Maginot Line in France in 1939.

Money being in better supply than courage, subsidies instead of weapons are employed to buy off enemies. To justify this departure from ancient tradition, the human mind easily devises its own justification. Military readiness, or aggressiveness, is denounced as primitive and immoral. Civilized peoples are too proud to fight. The conquest of one nation by another is declared to be immoral. Empires are wicked. This intellectual device enables us to suppress our feeling of inferiority, when we read of the heroism of our ancestors, and then ruefully contemplate our position today. 'It is not that we are afraid to fight,' we say, 'but we should consider it immoral.' This even enables us to assume an attitude of moral superiority.

The weakness of pacifism is that there are still many peoples in the world who are aggressive. Nations who proclaim themselves unwilling to fight are liable to be conquered by peoples in the stage of militarism— perhaps even to see themselves incorporated into some new empire, with the status of mere provinces or colonies.

When to be prepared to use force and when to give way is a perpetual human problem, which can only be solved, as best we can, in each successive situation as it arises. In fact, however, history seems to indicate that great nations do not normally disarm from motives of

conscience, but owing to the weakening of a sense of duty in the citizens, and the increase in selfishness and the desire for wealth and ease.

18

XVIII. The Age of Intellect

We have now, perhaps arbitrarily, divided the life-story of our great nation into four ages. The Age of the Pioneers (or the Outburst), the Age of Conquests, the Age of Commerce, and the Age of Affluence. The great wealth of the nation is no longer needed to supply the mere necessities, or even the luxuries of life. Ample funds are available also for the pursuit of knowledge.

The merchant princes of the Age of Commerce seek fame and praise, not only by endowing works of art or patronizing music and literature. They also found and endow colleges and universities. It is remarkable with what regularity this phase follows on that of wealth, in empire after empire, divided by many centuries.

In the eleventh century, the former Arab Empire, then in complete political decline, was ruled by the Seljuk sultan, Malik Shah. The Arabs, no longer soldiers, were still the intellectual leaders of the world. During the reign of Malik Shah, the building of universities and colleges became a passion.

Whereas a small number of universities in the great cities had sufficed the years of Arab glory, now a university sprang up in every town.

In our own lifetime, we have witnessed the same phenomenon in the U.S.A. and Britain.

When these nations were at the height of their glory, Harvard, Yale, Oxford and Cambridge seemed to meet their needs. Now almost every city has its university. The ambition of the

young, once engaged in the pursuit of adventure and military glory, and then in the desire for the accumulation of wealth, now turns to the acquisition of academic honors.

It is useful here to take note that almost all the pursuits followed with such passion throughout the ages were in themselves good. The manly cult of hardihood, frankness and truthfulness, which characterized the Age of Conquests, produced many really splendid heroes.

The opening up of natural resources, and the peaceful accumulation of wealth, which marked the age of commercialism, appeared to introduce new triumphs in civilization, in culture and in the arts. In the same way, the vast expansion of the field of knowledge achieved by the Age of Intellect seemed to mark a new high-water mark of human progress.

We cannot say that any of these changes were 'good' or 'bad'. The striking features in the pageant of empire are:

(a) the extraordinary exactitude with which these stages have followed one another, in empire after empire, over centuries or even millennia; and

(b) the fact that the successive changes seem to represent mere changes in popular fashion —new fads and fancies which sweep away public opinion without logical reason.

At first, popular enthusiasm is devoted to military glory, then to the accumulation of wealth and later to the acquisition of academic fame.

Why could not all these legitimate, and indeed beneficent, activities be carried on simultaneously, each of them in due moderation? Yet this never seemed to happen.

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XIX. The effects of intellectualism

There are so many things in human life which are not dreamt of in our popular philosophy. The spread of knowledge seems to be the most beneficial of human activities, and yet every period of decline is characterized by this expansion of intellectual activity. 'All the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell or to hear some new thing' is the description given in the Acts of the Apostles of the decline of Greek intellectualism.

The Age of Intellect is accompanied by surprising advances in natural science. In the ninth century, for example, in the age of Mamun, the Arabs measured the circumference of the earth with remarkable accuracy. Seven centuries were to pass before Western Europe discovered that the world was not flat. Less than fifty years after the amazing scientific discoveries under Mamun, the Arab Empire collapsed. Wonderful and beneficent as was the progress of science, it did not save the empire from chaos.

The full flowering of Arab and Persian intellectualism did not occur until after their imperial and political collapse. Thereafter the intellectuals attained fresh triumphs in the academic field, but politically they became the abject servants of the often illiterate rulers. When the Mongols conquered Persia in the thirteenth century, they were themselves entirely uneducated and were obliged to depend wholly on native

Persian officials to administer the country and to collect the revenue. They retained as wazeer, or Prime Minister, one Rashid al-Din, a historian of international repute. Yet as in the case of the Athenians, intellectualism leads to discussion, debate and argument, such as is

typical of the Western nations today. Debates in elected assemblies or local committees, in articles in the Press or in interviews on television— endless and incessant talking.

Men are interminably different, and intellectual arguments rarely lead to agreement. Thus public affairs drift from bad to worse, amid an unceasing cacophony of argument. But this constant dedication to discussion seems to destroy the power of action. Amid a Babel of talk, the ship drifts on to the rocks.

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XX. The inadequacy of intellect

Perhaps the most dangerous by-product of the Age of Intellect is the unconscious growth of the idea that the human brain can solve the problems of the world. Even on the low level of practical affairs this is patently untrue. Any small human activity, the local bowls club or the ladies' luncheon club, requires for its survival a measure of self sacrifice and service on the part of the members. In a wider national sphere, the survival of the nation depends basically on the loyalty and self-sacrifice of the citizens. The impression that the situation can be saved by mental cleverness, without unselfishness or human self-dedication, can only lead to collapse.

Thus we see that the cultivation of the human intellect seems to be a magnificent ideal, but only on condition that it does not weaken unselfishness and human dedication to service. Yet this, judging by historical precedent, seems to be exactly what it does do. Perhaps it is not the intellectualism which destroys the spirit of self-sacrifice—the least we can say is that the two, intellectualism and the loss of a sense of duty, appear simultaneously in the life-story of the nation.

Indeed it often appears in individuals, that the head and the heart are natural rivals. The brilliant but cynical intellectual appears at the opposite end of the spectrum from the emotional self-sacrifice of the hero or the martyr. Yet there are times when the perhaps unsophisticated self-dedication of the hero is more essential than the sarcasms of the clever.

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XXI. Civil dissensions

Another remarkable and unexpected symptom of national decline is the intensification of internal political hatreds. One would have expected that, when the survival of the nation became precarious, political factions would drop their rivalry and stand shoulder-to-shoulder to save their country.

In the fourteenth century, the weakening empire of Byzantium was threatened, and indeed dominated, by the Ottoman Turks.

The situation was so serious that one would have expected every subject of Byzantium to abandon his personal interests and to stand with his compatriots in a last desperate attempt to save the country. The reverse occurred. The Byzantines spent the last fifty years of their history in fighting one another in repeated civil wars, until the Ottomans moved in and administered the coup de grâce.

Britain has been governed by an elected parliament for many centuries. In former years, however, the rival parties observed many unwritten laws. Neither party wished to eliminate the other. All the members referred to one another as honorable gentlemen. But such courtesies have now lapsed. Booing, shouting and loud noises have undermined the dignity of the House, and angry exchanges are more frequent. We are fortunate if these rivalries are fought out in Parliament, but sometimes such hatreds are carried into the streets, or into industry in the form of strikes, demonstrations, boycotts and similar activities. True to the normal course followed by nations in decline, internal differences are not reconciled in an attempt to save the nation. On the contrary, internal rivalries become more acute, as the

nation becomes weaker.

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XXII. The influx of foreigners

One of the oft-repeated phenomena of great empires is the influx of foreigners to the capital city. Roman historians often complain of the number of Asians and Africans in Rome. Baghdad, in its prime in the ninth century, was international in its population—Persians, Turks, Arabs, Armenians, Egyptians, Africans and Greeks mingled in its streets.

In London today, Cypriots, Greeks, Italians, Russians, Africans, Germans and Indians jostle one another on the buses and in the underground, so that it sometimes seems difficult to find any British. The same applies to New York, perhaps even more so. This problem does not consist in any inferiority of one race as compared with another, but simply in the differences between them.

In the age of the first outburst and the subsequent Age of Conquests, the race is normally ethnically more or less homogeneous. This state of affairs facilitates a feeling of solidarity and comradeship. But in the Ages of Commerce and Affluence, every type of foreigner floods into the great city, the streets of which are reputed to be paved with gold. As, in most cases, this great city is also the capital of the empire, the cosmopolitan crowd at the seat of empire exercises a political influence greatly in excess of its relative numbers.

Second or third-generation foreign immigrants may appear outwardly to be entirely assimilated, but they often constitute a weakness in two directions. First, their basic human nature often differs from that of the original imperial stock. If the earlier imperial race was stubborn and slow moving, the immigrants might come from more emotional races, thereby introducing cracks and schisms into the national policies, even if all were equally loyal.

Second, while the nation is still affluent, all the diverse races may appear equally loyal. But in an acute emergency, the immigrants will often be less willing to sacrifice their lives and their property than will be the original descendants of the founder race.

Third, the immigrants are liable to form communities of their own, protecting primarily their own interests, and only in the second degree that of the nation as a whole.

Fourth, many of the foreign immigrants will probably belong to races originally conquered by and absorbed into the empire.

While the empire is enjoying its High Noon of prosperity, all these people are proud and historical examples of this phenomenon are scarcely needed. The idle and captious Roman mob, with its endless appetite for free distributions of food—bread and games—is notorious, and utterly different from that stern Roman spirit which we associate with the wars of the early republic.

In Baghdad, in the golden days of Harun al-Rashid, Arabs were a minority in the imperial capital. Istanbul, in the great days of Ottoman rule, was peopled by inhabitants remarkably few of whom were descendants of Turkish conquerors. In New York, descendants of the Pilgrim Fathers are few and far between.

This interesting phenomenon is largely limited to great cities. The original conquering race is often to be found in relative purity in rural districts and on far frontiers. It is the wealth of the great cities which draws the immigrants. As, with the growth of industry, cities nowadays achieve an ever greater preponderance over the countryside, so will the influence of foreigners increasingly dominate old empires.

Once more it may be emphasized that I do not wish to convey the impression that immigrants are inferior to older stocks. They are just different, and they thus tend to introduce cracks and divisions.

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XXIII. Frivolity

As the nation declines in power and wealth, a universal pessimism gradually pervades the people, and itself hastens the decline. There is nothing succeeds like success, and, in the Ages of Conquest and

Commerce, the nation was carried triumphantly onward on the wave of its own self-confidence. Republican Rome was repeatedly on the verge of extinction—in 390 B.C. when the Gauls sacked the city and in 216 B.C. after the Battle of Cannae. But no disasters could shake the resolution of the early Romans. Yet, in the later stages of Roman decline, the whole empire was deeply pessimistic, thereby sapping its own resolution.

Frivolity is the frequent companion of pessimism. Let us eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die. The resemblance between various declining nations in this respect is truly surprising. The Roman mob, we have seen, demanded free meals and public games. Gladiatorial shows, chariot races and athletic events were their passion.

In the Byzantine Empire the rivalries of the Greens and the Blues in the hippodrome attained the importance of a major crisis.

Judging by the time and space allotted to them in the Press and television, football and baseball are the activities which today chiefly interest the public in Britain and the United States respectively.

The heroes of declining nations are always the same—the athlete, the singer or the actor. The

word ‘celebrity’ today is used to designate a comedian or a football player, not a statesman, a general, or a literary genius.

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XXIV. The Arab decline

In the first half of the ninth century, Baghdad enjoyed its High Noon as the greatest and the richest city in the world. In 861, however, the reigning Khalif (caliph), Mutawakkil, was murdered by his Turkish mercenaries, who set up a military dictatorship, which lasted for some thirty years. During this period the empire fell apart, the various dominions and provinces each assuming virtual independence and seeking its own interests. Baghdad, lately the capital of a vast empire, found its authority limited to Iraq alone.

The works of the contemporary historians of Baghdad in the early tenth century are still available. They deeply deplored the degeneracy of the times in which they lived, emphasizing particularly the indifference to religion, the increasing materialism and the laxity of sexual morals. They lamented also the corruption of the officials of the government and the fact that politicians always seemed to amass large fortunes while they were in office.

The historians commented bitterly on the extraordinary influence acquired by popular singers over young people, resulting in a decline in sexual morality. The 'pop' singers of Baghdad accompanied their erotic songs on the lute, an instrument resembling the modern guitar. In the second half of the tenth century, as a result, much obscene sexual language came increasingly into use, such as would not have been tolerated in an earlier age. Several khalifs issued orders banning 'pop' singers from the capital, but within a few years they always returned.

An increase in the influence of women in public life has often been associated with national decline. The later Romans complained that, although Rome ruled the world, women ruled

Rome. In the tenth century, a similar tendency was observable in the Arab Empire, the women demanding admission to the professions hitherto monopolized by men.

'What,' wrote the contemporary historian, Ibn Bessam, 'have the professions of clerk, tax-collector or preacher to do with women?

These occupations have always been limited to men alone.' Many women practiced law, while others obtained posts as university professors. There was an agitation for the appointment of female judges, which, however, does not appear to have succeeded.

Soon after this period, government and public order collapsed, and foreign invaders overran the country. The resulting increase in confusion and violence made it unsafe for women to move unescorted in the streets, with the result that this feminist movement collapsed.

The disorders following the military takeover in 861, and the loss of the empire, had played havoc with the economy. At such a moment, it might have been expected that everyone would redouble their efforts to save the country from bankruptcy, but nothing of the kind occurred. Instead, at this moment of declining trade and financial stringency, the people of Baghdad introduced a five-day week.

When I first read these contemporary descriptions of tenth-century Baghdad, I could scarcely believe my eyes. I told myself that this must be a joke! The descriptions might have been taken out of The Times today. The resemblance of all the details was especially breathtaking—the break-up of the empire, the abandonment of sexual morality, the 'pop' singers with their guitars, the entry of women into the professions, the five-day

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XXV. Political ideology

Today we attach immense importance to the ideology of our internal politics. The Press and public media in the U.S.A. and Britain pour incessant scorn on any country the political institutions of which differ in any manner from our own idea of democracy. It is, therefore, interesting to note that the life-expectation of a great nation does not appear to be in any way affected by the nature of its institutions.

Past empires show almost every possible variation of political system, but all go through the same procedure from the Age of Pioneers through Conquest, Commerce, Affluence to decline and collapse.

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XXVI. The Mameluke Empire

The empire of the Mamelukes of Egypt provides a case in point, for it was one of the most exotic ever to be recorded in history. It is also exceptional in that it began on one fixed day and ended on another, leaving no doubt of its precise duration, which was 267 years.

In the first part of the thirteenth century, Egypt and Syria were ruled by the Ayoubid sultans, the descendants of the family of Saladin. Their army consisted of Mamelukes, slaves imported as boys from the Steppes and trained as professional soldiers. On 1st May 1250, the Mamelukes mutinied, murdered Turan Shah, the Ayoubid sultan, and became the rulers of his empire.

The first fifty years of the Mameluke Empire were marked by desperate fighting with the hitherto invincible Mongols, the descendants of Genghis Khan, who invaded Syria. By defeating the Mongols and driving them out of Syria, the Mamelukes saved the Mediterranean from the terrible fate which had overtaken Persia. In 1291, the Mamelukes captured Acre, and put an end to the Crusades.

From 1309 to 1341, the Mameluke Empire was everywhere victorious and possessed the finest army in the world. For the ensuing hundred years the wealth of the Mameluke Empire was fabulous, slowly leading to luxury, the relaxation of discipline and to decline, with ever more bitter internal political rivalries. Finally the empire collapsed in 1517, as the result of military defeat by the Ottomans.

The Mameluke government appears to us utterly illogical and fantastic. The ruling class was

entirely recruited from young boys, born in what is now Southern Russia. Every one of them was enlisted as a private soldier.

Even the sultans had begun life as private soldiers and had risen from the ranks. Yet this extraordinary political system resulted in an empire which passed through all the normal stages of conquest, commercialism, affluence and decline and which lasted approximately the usual period of time.

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XXVII. The master race

The people of the great nations of the past seem normally to have imagined that their preeminence would last for ever. Rome appeared to its citizens to be destined to be for all time the mistress of the world. The Abbasid Khalifs of Baghdad declared that God had appointed them to rule mankind until the day of judgment. Seventy years ago, many people in Britain believed that the empire would endure for ever. Although Hitler failed to achieve his objective, he declared that Germany would rule the world for a thousand years. That sentiments like these could be publicly expressed without evoking derision shows that, in all ages, the regular rise and fall of great nations has passed unperceived. The simplest statistics prove the steady rotation of one nation after another at regular intervals.

The belief that their nation would rule the world forever, naturally encouraged the citizens of the leading nation of any period to attribute their preeminence to hereditary virtues. They carried in their blood, they believed, qualities which constituted them a race of supermen, an illusion which inclined them to the employment of cheap foreign labor (or slaves) to perform menial tasks and to engage foreign mercenaries to fight their battles or to sail their ships.

These poorer peoples were only too happy to migrate to the wealthy cities of the empire, and thereby, as we have seen, to adulterate the close-knit, homogeneous character of the conquering race. The latter unconsciously assumed that they would always be the leaders of mankind, relaxed their energies, and spent an increasing part of their time in leisure, amusement or sport.

In recent years, the idea has spread widely in the West that ‘progress’ will be automatic

without effort, that everyone will continue to grow richer and richer and that every year will show a 'rise in the standard of living'. We have not drawn from history the obvious conclusion that material success is the result of courage, endurance and hard work—a conclusion nevertheless obvious from the history of the meteoric rise of our own ancestors. This self-assurance of its own superiority seems to go hand-in-hand with the luxury resulting from wealth, in undermining the character of the dominant race.

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XXVIII. The welfare state

When the welfare state was first introduced in Britain, it was hailed as a new high-water mark in the history of human development.

History, however, seems to suggest that the age of decline of a great nation is often a period which shows a tendency to philanthropy and to sympathy for other races. This phase may not be contradictory to the feeling described in the previous paragraph, that the dominant race has the right to rule the world. For the citizens of the great nation enjoy the role of Lady Bountiful.

As long as it retains its status of leadership, the imperial people are glad to be generous, even if slightly condescending. The rights of citizenship are generously bestowed on every race, even those formerly subject, and the equality of mankind is proclaimed. The Roman Empire passed through this phase, when equal citizenship was thrown open to all peoples, such provincials even becoming senators and emperors.

The Arab Empire of Baghdad was equally, perhaps even more, generous. During the Age of Conquests, pure-bred Arabs had constituted a ruling class, but in the ninth century the empire was completely cosmopolitan.

State assistance to the young and the poor was equally generous. University students received government grants to cover their expenses while they were receiving higher education. The State likewise offered free medical treatment to the poor. The first free public hospital was opened in Baghdad in The impression that it will always be automatically rich causes the

declining empire to spend lavishly on its own benevolence, until such time as the economy collapses, the universities are closed and the hospitals fall into ruin.

It may perhaps be incorrect to picture the welfare state as the high-water mark of human attainment. It may merely prove to be one more regular milestone in the life story of an aging and decrepit empire.

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XXIX. Religion

Historians of periods of decadence often refer to a decline in religion, but, if we extend our investigation over a period covering the Assyrians (859-612 B.C.) to our own times, we have to interpret religion in a very broad sense. Some such definition as 'the human feeling that there is something, some invisible Power, apart from material objects, which controls human life and the natural world'.

We are probably too narrow and contemptuous in our interpretation of idol worship. The people of ancient civilizations were as sensible as we are, and would scarcely have been so foolish as to worship sticks and stones fashioned by their own hands. The idol was for them merely a symbol, and represented an unknown, spiritual reality, which controlled the lives of men and demanded human obedience to its moral precepts.

We all know only too well that minor differences in the human visualization of this Spirit frequently became the ostensible reason for human wars, in which both sides claimed to be fighting for the true God, but the absurd narrowness of human conceptions should not blind us to the fact that, very often, both sides believed their campaigns to have a moral background.

Genghis Khan, one of the most brutal of all conquerors, claimed that God had delegated him the duty to exterminate the decadent races of the civilized world. Thus the Age of Conquests often had some kind of religious atmosphere, which implied heroic self-sacrifice for the cause.

But this spirit of dedication was slowly eroded in the Age of Commerce by the action of money. People make money for themselves, not for their country. Thus periods of affluence gradually dissolved the spirit of service, which had caused the rise of the imperial races.

In due course, selfishness permeated the community, the coherence of which was weakened until disintegration was threatened. Then, as we have seen, came the period of pessimism with the accompanying spirit of frivolity and sensual indulgence, byproducts of despair. It was inevitable at such times that men should look back yearningly to the days of 'religion', when the spirit of self-sacrifice was still strong enough to make men ready to give and to serve, rather than to snatch.

But while despair might permeate the greater part of the nation, others achieved a new realization of the fact that only readiness for self-sacrifice could enable a community to survive. Some of the greatest saints in history lived in times of national decadence, raising the banner of duty and service against the flood of depravity and despair.

In this manner, at the height of vice and frivolity the seeds of religious revival are quietly sown. After, perhaps, several generations (or even centuries) of suffering, the impoverished nation has been purged of its selfishness and its love of money, religion regains its sway and a new era sets in. 'It is good for me that I have been afflicted,' said the psalmist, 'that I might learn Thy Statutes.'

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XXX. New combinations

We have traced the rise of an obscure race to fame, through the stages of conquest, commercialism, affluence, and intellectualism, to disintegration, decadence and despair. We suggested that the dominant race at any given time imparts its leading characteristics to the world around, being in due course succeeded by another empire. By this means, we speculated, many successive races succeeded one another as superpowers, and in turn bequeathed their peculiar qualities to mankind at large.

But the objection may here be raised that some day the time will come when all the races of the world will in turn have enjoyed their period of domination and have collapsed again in decadence. When the whole human race has reached the stage of decadence, where will new energetic conquering races be found?

The answer is at first partially obscured by our modern habit of dividing the human race into nations, which we seem to regard as water-tight compartments, an error responsible for innumerable misunderstandings.

In earlier times, warlike nomadic nations invaded the territories of decadent peoples and settled there. In due course, they intermarried with the local population and a new race resulted, though it sometimes retained an old name. The barbarian invasions of the Roman Empire probably provide the example best known today in the West. Others were the Arab conquests of Spain, North Africa and Persia, the Turkish conquests of the Ottoman Empire, or even the Norman Conquest of England.

In all such cases, the conquered countries were originally fully inhabited and the invaders were armies, which ultimately settled down and married, and produced new races.

In our times, there are few nomadic conquerors left in the world, who could invade more settled countries bringing their tents and flocks with them. But ease of travel has resulted in an equal, or probably an even greater, inter-mixture of populations. The extreme bitterness of modern internal political struggles produces a constant flow of migrants from their native countries to others, where the social institutions suit them better.

The vicissitudes of trade and business similarly result in many persons moving to other countries, at first intending to return, but ultimately settling down in their new countries.

The population of Britain has been constantly changing, particularly in the last sixty years, owing to the influx of immigrants from Europe, Asia and Africa, and the exit of British citizens to the Dominions and the United States. The latter is, of course, the most obvious example of the constant rise of new nations, and of the transformation of the ethnic content of old nations through this modern nomadism.

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XXXI. Decadence of a system

It is of interest to note that decadence is the disintegration of a system, not of its individual members. The habits of the members of the community have been corrupted by the enjoyment of too much money and too much power for too long a period. The result has been, in the framework of their national life, to make them selfish and idle. A community of selfish and idle people declines, internal quarrels develop in the division of its dwindling wealth, and pessimism follows, which some of them endeavor to drown in sensuality or frivolity. In their own surroundings, they are unable to redirect their thoughts and their energies into new channels.

But when individual members of such a society emigrate into entirely new surroundings, they do not remain conspicuously decadent, pessimistic or immoral among the inhabitants of their new homeland. Once enabled to break away from their old channels of thought, and after a short period of readjustment, they become normal citizens of their adopted countries. Some of them, in the second and third generations, may attain preeminence and leadership in their new communities.

This seems to prove that the decline of any nation does not undermine the energies or the basic character of its members. Nor does the decadence of a number of such nations permanently impoverish the human race. Decadence is both mental and moral deterioration, produced by the slow decline of the community from which its members cannot escape, as long as they remain in their old surroundings. But, transported elsewhere, they soon discard their decadent ways of thought, and prove themselves equal to the other citizens of their adopted country.

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XXXII. Decadence is not physical

Neither is decadence physical. The citizens of nations in decline are sometimes described as too physically emasculated to be able to bear hardship or make great efforts.

This does not seem to be a true picture.

Citizens of great nations in decadence are normally physically larger and stronger than those of their barbarian invaders.

Moreover, as was proved in Britain in the first World War, young men brought up in luxury and wealth found little difficulty in accustoming themselves to life in the front line trenches. The history of exploration proves the same point. Men accustomed to comfortable living in homes in Europe or America were able to show as much endurance as the natives in riding camels across the desert or in hacking their way through tropical forests.

Decadence is a moral and spiritual disease, resulting from too long a period of wealth and power, producing cynicism, decline of religion, pessimism and frivolity. The citizens of such a nation will no longer make an effort to save themselves, because they are not convinced that anything in life is worth saving.

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XXXIII. Human diversity

Generalizations are always dangerous.

Human beings are all different. The variety in human life is endless. If this be the case with individuals, it is much more so with nations and cultures. No two societies, no two peoples, no two cultures are exactly the same. In these circumstances, it will be easy for critics to find many objections to what has been said, and to point out exceptions to the generalizations.

There is some value in comparing the lives of nations to those of individuals. No two persons in the world are identical. Moreover their lives are often affected by accidents or by illness, making the divergences even more obvious. Yet, in fact, we can generalize about human life from many different aspects. The characteristics of childhood, adolescence, youth, middle and old age are well known. Some adolescents, it is true, are prematurely wise and serious. Some persons in middle age still seem to he young. But such exceptions do not invalidate the general character of human life from the cradle to the grave.

I venture to submit that the lives of nations follow a similar pattern. Superficially, all seem to be completely different. Some years ago, a suggestion was submitted to a certain television corporation that a series of talks on Arab history would form an interesting sequence. The proposal was immediately vetoed by the director of programs with the remark, "What earthly interest could the history of medieval Arabs have for the general public today?"

Yet, in fact, the history of the Arab imperial age—from conquest through commercialism, to affluence, intellectualism, science and decadence—is an exact precursor of British imperial

history and lasted almost exactly the same time.

If British historians, a century ago, had devoted serious study to the Arab Empire, they could have foreseen almost everything that has happened in Britain down to 1976.

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XXXIV. A variety of falls

It has been shown that, normally, the rise and fall of great nations are due to internal reasons alone. Ten generations of human beings suffice to transform the hardy and enterprising pioneer into the captious citizen of the welfare state. But whereas the life histories of great nations show an unexpected uniformity, the nature of their falls depends largely on outside circumstances and thus shows a high degree of diversity.

The Roman Republic, as we have seen, was followed by the empire, which became a super-state, in which all the natives of the Mediterranean basin, regardless of race, possessed equal rights. The name of Rome, originally a city-state, passed from it to an equalitarian international empire.

This empire broke in half, the western half being overrun by northern barbarians, the eastern half forming the East Roman or Byzantine Empire.

The vast Arab Empire broke up in the ninth century into many fragments, of which one former colony, Moslem Spain, ran its own 250-year course as an independent empire. The homelands of Syria and Iraq, however, were conquered by successive waves of Turks to whom they remained subject for 1,000 years.

The Mameluke Empire of Egypt and Syria, on the other hand, was conquered in one campaign by the Ottomans, the native population merely suffering a change of masters.

The Spanish Empire (1500-1750) endured for the conventional 250 years, terminated only by

the loss of its colonies. The homeland of Spain fell, indeed, from its high estate of a Romanov Russia (1682-1916) ran the normal course, but was succeeded by the Soviet Union.

It is unnecessary to labor the point, which we may attempt to summarize briefly. Any regime which attains great wealth and power seems with remarkable regularity to decay and fall apart in some ten generations. The ultimate fate of its component parts, however, does not depend on its internal nature, but on the other organizations which appear at the time of its collapse and succeed in devouring its heritage. Thus the lives of great powers are surprisingly uniform, but the results of their falls are completely diverse.

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XXXV. Inadequacy of our historical studies

In fact, the modern nations of the West have derived only limited value from their historical studies, because they have never made them big enough. For history to have meaning, as we have already stated, it must be the history of the human race.

Far from achieving such an ideal, our historical studies are largely limited to the history of our own country during the lifetime of the present nation. Thus the time factor is too short to allow the longer rhythms of the rise and fall of nations even to be noticed. As the television director indicated, it never even crosses our minds that longer periods could be of any interest.

When we read the history of our own nation, we find the actions of our ancestors described as glorious, while those of other peoples are depicted as mean, tyrannical or cowardly. Thus our history is (intentionally) not based on facts. We are emotionally unwilling to accept that our forbears might have been mean or cowardly.

Alternatively, there are 'political' schools of history, slanted to discredit the actions of our past leaders, in order to support modern political movements. In all these cases, history is not an attempt to ascertain the truth, but a system of propaganda, devoted to the furtherance of modern projects, or the gratification of national vanity.

Men can scarcely be blamed for not learning from the history they are taught.

There is nothing to learn from it, because it is not true.

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XXXVI. Small nations

The word ‘empires’ has been used in this essay to signify nations which achieve the status of great powers, or super-powers, in the jargon of today—nations which have dominated the international scene for two or three centuries. At any given time, however, there are also smaller states which are more or less self-contained. Do these live the same ‘lives’ as the great nations, and pass through the same phases?

It seems impossible to generalize on this issue. In general, decadence is the outcome of too long a period of wealth and power. If the small country has not shared in the wealth and power, it will not share in the decadence.

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XXXVII. The emerging pattern

In spite of the endless variety and the infinite complications of human life, a general pattern does seem to emerge from these considerations. It reveals many successive empires covering some 3,000 years, as having followed similar stages of development and decline, and as having, to a surprising degree, 'lived' lives of very similar length.

The life-expectation of a great nation, it appears, commences with a violent, and usually unforeseen, outburst of energy, and ends in a lowering of moral standards, cynicism, pessimism and frivolity.

If the present writer were a millionaire, he would try to establish in some university or other a department dedicated solely to the study of the rhythm of the rise and fall of powerful nations throughout the world. History goes back only some 3,000 years, because before that period writing was not sufficiently widespread to allow of the survival of detailed records. But within that period, the number of empires available for study is very great.

At the commencement of this essay, the names of eleven such empires were listed, but these included only the Middle East and the modern nations of the West. India, China and Southern America were not included, because the writer knows nothing about them. A school founded to study the rise and fall of empires would probably find at least twenty-four great powers available for dissection and analysis.

The task would not be an easy one, if indeed the net were cast so wide as to cover virtually all the world's great nations in 3,000 years. The knowledge of language alone, to enable detailed

investigations to be pursued, would present a formidable obstacle.

XXXVIII. Would it help?

It is pleasing to imagine that, from such studies, a regular life-pattern of nations would emerge, including an analysis of the various changes which ultimately lead to decline, decadence and collapse. It is tempting to assume that measures could be adopted to forestall the disastrous effects of excessive wealth and power, and thence of subsequent decadence. Perhaps some means could be devised to prevent the activist Age of Conquests and Commerce deteriorating into the Age of Intellect, producing endless talking but no action.

It is tempting to think so. Perhaps if the pattern of the rise and fall of nations were regularly taught in schools, the general public would come to realize the truth, and would support policies to maintain the spirit of duty and self-sacrifice, and to forestall the accumulation of excessive wealth by one nation, leading to the demoralization of that nation.

Could not the sense of duty and the initiative needed to give rise to action be retained parallel with intellectual development and the discoveries of natural science?

The answer is doubtful, though we could but try. The weaknesses of human nature, however, are so obvious, that we cannot be too confident of success. Men bursting with courage, energy and self-confidence cannot easily be restrained from subduing their neighbors, and men who see the prospect of wealth open to them will not readily be prevented from pursuing it.

Perhaps it is not in the real interest of humanity that they should be so prevented, for it is in periods of wealth that art, architecture, music, science and literature make the greatest

progress.

Moreover, as we have seen where great empires are concerned, their establishment may give rise to wars and tragedies, but their periods of power often bring peace, security and prosperity to vast areas of territory. Our

These doubts, however, need not prevent us from attempting to acquire more knowledge on the rise and fall of great powers, or from endeavoring, in the light of such knowledge, to improve the moral quality of human life.

Perhaps, in fact, we may reach the conclusion that the successive rise and fall of great nations is inevitable and, indeed, a system divinely ordained. But even this would be an immense gain. For we should know where we stand in relation to our human brothers and sisters. In our present state of mental chaos on the subject, we divide ourselves into nations, parties or communities and fight, hate and vilify one another over developments which may perhaps be divinely ordained and which seem to us, if we take a broader view, completely uncontrollable and inevitable. If we could accept these great movements as beyond our control, there would be no excuse for our hating one another because of them.

However varied, confusing and contradictory the religious history of the world may appear, the noblest and most spiritual of the devotees of all religions seem to reach the conclusion that love is the key to human life. Any expansion of our knowledge which may lead to a reduction in our unjustified hates is therefore surely well worth while.

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XXXIX. Summary

As numerous points of interest have arisen in the course of this essay, I close with a brief summary, to refresh the reader's mind.

(a) We do not learn from history because our studies are brief and prejudiced.

(b) In a surprising manner, 250 years emerges as the average length of national greatness.

(c) This average has not varied for 3,000 years. Does it represent ten generations?

(d) The stages of the rise and fall of great nations seem to be:

The Age of Pioneers (outburst)
The Age of Conquests
The Age of Commerce
The Age of Affluence
The Age of Intellect
The Age of Decadence.

(e) Decadence is marked by:

Defensiveness
Pessimism
Materialism
Frivolity
An influx of foreigners
The Welfare State

A weakening of religion.

(f) Decadence is due to:

Too long a period of wealth and power

Selfishness

Love of money

The loss of a sense of duty.

(g) The life histories of great states are amazingly similar, and are due to internal factors.

(h) Their falls are diverse, because they are largely the result of external causes.

(i) History should be taught as the history of the human race, though of course with emphasis on the history of the student's own country.

About the Author

Also by Estate of Sir John Bagot Glubb